

bhtv-2012-04-23-loury-mcwhorter

LOURY: Hey there, John McWhorter.

McWHORTER: Glenn Loury, how are you doing?

LOURY: I'm doing OK. Welcome back to *The Glenn Show*, John.

Long time no talk to.

McWHORTER: Good, about a month, I think it is, right?

LOURY: I think it's more than that. It seems like six months, John. (laughter)

McWHORTER: That shouldn't have happened.

LOURY: How are you doing? What's up? What's going on?

McWHORTER: Not much. Seeing out the end of the term at Columbia. I just got back from a conference on linguistics in Denmark, which was actually a lot of fun, except that I had to fly all the way to Denmark. And it looks like --

LOURY: Were you presenting? Excuse me. Did you present something at the conference?

McWHORTER: I did. One of my Language Study areas is Language Contact. And my take on what makes a creole language -- like, say, Haitian Creole -- interesting has been considered controversial for about the past 15 years. And I have actually mounted a frontal attack on a couple of the people who have been arguing against me, because I've decided it was necessary. So I had to go to this

conference, which is one of the big creole language conferences, to make my case in person. And I think it went pretty well.

LOURY: John, that's exciting, and that's impressive.

McWHORTER: It was fun.

LOURY: First of all, there's a McWhorter Hypothesis out there that people take seriously enough to bother refuting --

McWHORTER: Yeah, that's true. (laughter)

LOURY: -- and have been doing so for over a decade.

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: And secondly, the international convocations that consider such matters at the highest level have to hear from you.

McWHORTER: Well, I don't know if they figure they have to, but I insisted on being at this one.

LOURY: (laughter)

McWHORTER: And, you know --

LOURY: So...

McWHORTER: -- what's interesting --

LOURY: Yeah.

McWHORTER: -- as I'm sure you found, is that as you get a little older, the main thing is convincing the younger ones. And so at this one -- this is the first conference like that I've been to where I'm in my mid-40s, and there

are a bunch of new ones who are 23, and they look at it differently than the people who are my age or older. And I enjoyed that.

LOURY: I see. Well, I have a vague memory of what it felt like to be in my mid-40s and enjoyed being older than people who were 20 years younger than myself. (laughter) But that memory is already fading, John.

McWHORTER: (laughter) Yeah.

LOURY: So my perspective on things is a good deal different from that. But I get this old/young contrast, because I have that in my field as well, and the younger whippersnappers who are coming along these days -- the young economics analysts and empiricists and data manipulators and number-crunchers don't see things the way we used to in the old days. It's like they don't have the same vision, you know? (laughter) I feel like --

McWHORTER: Vision.

LOURY: -- it's not a matter of convincing them, it's a matter of waking them up.

McWHORTER: Right.

LOURY: I feel like I want to say, "We're social scientists, not bean counters." Like --

McWHORTER: Oh, they're too narrow.

LOURY: Yeah. Oh, man. Well, if I begin to complain about this now, it may consume the entire of our time, and I don't know that you or the audience wants to hear it. But the short answer is yes.

McWHORTER: Hmm.

LOURY: Way too narrow. The short answer is, well...

(laughter) Again, sorry for the self-aggrandizement.

McWHORTER: That's all right.

LOURY: When I was in my 20s, I started reading the *New York Review of Books*.

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: When I was in my 30s, I started going to read some of the books that I saw reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*. You understand what I'm saying?

McWHORTER: Very much.

LOURY: I'm now in my 60s, OK? I've read a good number of those books. And it seems to me that I can not find any other economist who has. (laughter) That puts it a little strongly, and it certainly is patting myself on the back. But I'll be darned if I can get anybody to talk to me seriously about anything that was written before 1990.

McWHORTER: Really?

LOURY: Yeah.

McWHORTER: Hmm.

LOURY: Really.

McWHORTER: And it's because --

LOURY: And I'll be darned if I can hold a conversation between two different parts of the department that are distinguished only by the micro-subfields within which they concentrate.

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm. That was the oth--

LOURY: They don't even talk to each other. They don't go to each other's seminars. They have their own little students, and their own little world. They talk to 200 --

McWHORTER: (laughter) "Little students."

LOURY: -- other people. Well, "little" is diminutive, but --

McWHORTER: I know what you mean.

LOURY: -- in my mind, it seems small.

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: They talk to 200 other specialists in their area. They're only concerned about a half-dozen journalists. Nobody reads any books. If you publish in a book, it's already old hat, because, you see, it took you that long to write the book, so the frontier has moved on .

McWHORTER: It's all about articles, right.

LOURY: And it's all about this imagined frontier, and this sense of science, as if the enterprise that we're engaged in were one of these Particle Physics laboratories where

the answer is out in the 18th decimal point. And you've got a framework that you can pretty surely -- we're social scientists. We're as much --

McWHORTER: So --

LOURY: -- immersed in culture and history and the ebb and flow of politics and the rise and fall of human passion as we are in the bean-counting business of double-entry bookkeeping and adding up our sums. And yet, my colleagues don't seem to know it. End of rant. I apologize.

McWHORTER: To get you to continue to continue in it a little more, because I find that interesting -- isn't the idea, and I'm no economist remotely, but I'm getting a sense of an analogy with a lot of social science. The idea is that all of these numbers are the real truth, and that when you go into the more encyclopedic or humanistic way of looking at things, all of that is just intelligent impressions that we've now gotten beyond, and the truth is in the numbers. Is that the idea?

LOURY: Something like that. I think you've got the spirit of it. I think the idea is, let's talk about what we can actually know what we're talking about. And not let's just talk for the sake of hearing ourselves talking. And I think the idea is that, for example, historical interpretation. OK? So there's a question about causality

in the social sciences, of course. Can I demonstrate -- does my theory suggest and do my data confirm -- that A causes B. This kind of thing. But then there's also a question about the meaning of events -- how they come to be understood. What significance they take on, what role they play in the imaginative life and the symbolic life of the society. Now, let me just give a very concrete example. So, incarceration -- this is a problem I've been working on -- has risen in the United States, and there's a question of why. What caused it? Is it because crime rates are higher? Is it because prison sentences are longer? What combination of those things? Has human behavior changed? Is it because of the demographic shifts? And so on. OK? So, there's a question of why. There's also a question of, if you will, the meaning for American democracy of the fact of incarceration having so increased. And there's a question of the extent to which the political sensibilities that buttressed and supported the change in policies reflect this or that reaction to this or that historical event, like the riots in the 1960s, or the Black Power movement or whatever. OK? So those latter kinds of questions are questions of historical interpretation about the meaning of events. And it's possible to say of such questions, "Who can know the answer?" Therefore, let us

attend to the things that we can measure, and that we can account for precisely. I think that this is a profound era. It's a moral era, as well as a scientific era. The idea that I will only look under the lamppost because that's where the light shines, OK?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: When I'm not even sure that that's the right kind of light. If you see what I mean?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: The analogy is a little bit strained, but the point is, people are leaning so heavily upon very specific methodological commitments, and very specific substantive claims about human nature and human behavior. They lean very heavily on their models, very heavily on their presumptions. And then they rule out anything that doesn't fit within their boxes. And this idea that quantitative measurement is the end-all and be-all -- now, I'm not against it. I'm not against it. In the revolution of the late 19th century, and the social sciences in the early 20th century, that brought these quantitative methods, and this kind of statistical analysis, and these kind of comprehensive surveys of population and censuses and the data sets and all the rest -- these were revolutionary, and these are profound things. And we've learned a lot from

them. But I'm telling you, if I want to understand what's going on with prisons, I'm a social scientist! I'm trying to understand the society, OK?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: Then I need to take this other stuff on board, and I need to be broad-minded enough, first, to education myself. And then, if you will, that will allow my, you know, my analytic manipulations to be constrained and influenced by stuff, the full nature of which I don't fully understand. You know? So there's that arrogance. There's anarrogance in this profession, in my humble opinion -- my humble opinion -- that has crept in, to where people sneer because somebody else doesn't know as much advanced mathematics as they do.

McWHORTER: Sure.

LOURY: But this other person just happens to have spent 20 years immersing themselves in the culture, the history, the literature, the myths, and so forth and so on. They won't listen to anthropologists. They won't listen to historians. They won't listen to political scientists, except the ones who are trying to be economists. I'm really sick and tired of them, I'm sorry. That's the end of the rant, but I had to repeat it. I'm sorry.

McWHORTER: (laughter) I can imagine how that feels.

LOURY: (laughter)

McWHORTER: That's interesting. It reminds me a little bit of some of the things that are going on in Linguistics, right now, although they don't impact me as directly as the equivalents in your field impact you. But it's hard when you feel like what interests you, and why you came into the field, is completely different from why many of your colleagues did. So in my case, for example -- in Linguistics, I've said -- and I'm going to just boil 15 years of debate down to a very simple thing. If you learn French, you're going to work really hard at it from the very beginning. If you learn Haitian Creole, you're going to find that it's a complex language like any other, but almost all of what worried you about French is not there. And it's because the language formed in a hurry, by slaves -- they formed it. And the result is that they streamlined it. They took out a lot of the harder stuff. And as I just said -- 15 years ago, creole languages, as languages go, are less complex than older --

LOURY: OK. Hold on. Yeah, let me just make sure I'm grasping this point. French as a language evolved over a long period of time, and so its grammatical construction -- I don't know quite know to put this Linguistic-wise --

McWHORTER: That's good enough. Yeah.

LOURY: -- is complex, and has a lot of curlicues and a lot of barnacles and a lot of interesting stuff in it.

McWHORTER: "Curlicues and barnacles" is perfect. Correct.

LOURY: And if you're going to speak the language well, you've got to learn all that stuff. Whereas a creole -- which is a kind of *lingua franca*, or something -- it's kind of --

McWHORTER: That's right.

LOURY: -- developed within a specific context, in a hurry, amongst people who couldn't otherwise communicate with each other?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: Has stripped away a lot of that layered complexity and in some way or another, is more transparent, or easier to get one's arms around.

McWHORTER: You have used many of the terms that I, myself, have used, including "transparent." That's exactly it.

LOURY: Oh, well that's excellent, that I could guess so well.

(laughter)

McWHORTER: Very good!

LOURY: But this is controversial, I take it?

McWHORTER: Yes. You can see that, even as a non-linguist, what you just said -- which I basically sparked in you -- seems to make a certain intuitive sense.

LOURY: Yeah, it makes a certain intuitive sense.

McWHORTER: And yet, when I said, 15 years ago, these languages are not as complex as other ones, and here's how they're not (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

LOURY: Oh, I see. It was like you were putting them down, for being backward or simplistic in some way.

McWHORTER: Right. And needless to say, because of, you know, just who I am and what I do, I put it all very carefully. You know, there was no language to imply that I was saying anything was wrong with the languages, and I piled on all sorts of indications that I didn't think that that was the case. But nevertheless, I was, you know, jumped by people I'm not going to name -- because I don't want this to be *ad hominem* -- with implications that I'm either a racist myself -- and, you know, there's a certain irony there, that I have something against creole speakers, or that I'm an incompetent linguist. And, frankly, it's the second one that bothered me more than the first one.
(laughter)

LOURY: Right. It would. Yeah. (laughter)

McWHORTER: So, I've been fighting this battle for years. And, you know, there's still some people out there who could make a very good case for themselves, I suppose, who will never agree with me. But the younger ones coming in seem to at least realize that I'm not crazy. But, I'll

just say, very briefly, the reason that I think the people who hate me the most on this hate me. And, understand, this is a completely separate set of people from the people who don't like editorials about race. They're not as interested in the world's languages as I am. You know, they're interested in a little French, a little Haitian Creole, and some others, but I'm just agog at all 6,000 languages in the world, and I like to just read about them. And I've gradually found, they are interested in other things, but that's not what they do. We're not in the field for the same reasons. And it helps create this inability to communicate. So I know what you mean about feeling like you're in a different place than all of the people who are your colleagues -- or many of them.

LOURY: So, then, let me just ask you, John -- since we're having this conversation -- this wonderful conversation, I might add, about our various professional meanderings, and our rootlessness, and so on. And sort of being out of step...

McWHORTER: "Rootless." Yeah.

LOURY: And out of step. So how is your intellectual life these days, there in New York City?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: You know, you're up at Columbia. You know, do you feel like a man without a country?

McWHORTER: Hm.

LOURY: Or do you have compatriots who can kind of hear the same music?

McWHORTER: You know, it's at the point where I feel more compatriated lately. Because I've been teaching at Columbia for four years now, and I first started doing it as kind of a lark, because -- you know, editorializing alone can get kind of dull.

LOURY: Yeah, man.

McWHORTER: And I started to miss the campus setting. I did one campus talk, and I was just looking at the students out on the lawn. And I had this very clear feeling -- it was almost the feeling religious people describe as getting the call -- where I thought all of the ambiguities aside, I miss this a little. I should have at least one foot in the campus setting. And so I gradually started building it. But it also ended up being more work than I thought, especially if you're a linguist. At Columbia, they don't have a Linguistics department, so you get just jumped by, you know, dozens of students who need you. And that's fun, but it's work. And you're supervising these theses, and you're teaching these classes with massive enrollment. So

last year, I decided I can't keep doing this for no money. They were giving me an adjunct's money, and at first I found that kind of honorable and cute, because I make enough money doing the other stuff. But I'm spending so much time in Morningside Heights now, busting my butt, that I thought, "I want to get paid what all the other grown-ups get paid." And I'm happy to say that a couple of weeks ago, apparently it turned out that they're going to do it. I'm going to be an Associate Professor in the English Department, and I'm going to have an office.

LOURY: Whoa, John!

McWHORTER: And more to the point, a salary. So...

(laughter)

LOURY: Now, is that a term appointment that's renewable? Are you on a tenure track? How does that work? In the English Department, that...?

McWHORTER: Every five years and I highly suspect that if I stick around I could pull -- although to tell you the truth, and you can tell me if I'm wrong, because I'm not a practical person -- the tenure part doesn't matter to me that much, because, you know, I got tenure, and you can't get it again, and I don't need that particular honor. I'm just happy to get paid a grown-up salary. But I suppose if I stay on, in order to protect myself in various ways, I

should work on getting this tenure re-appellation. But for now --

LOURY: Well, (laughter) I'm not knowledgeable enough about the local scene there to advise you on strategy. I mean, I would say --

McWHORTER: You mean, it's different.

LOURY: -- tenure is the security that you have tenure, OK? So, you know, they're not going to lay you off unless they lay everybody off. But beyond that, I mean -- you know, it's just bragging rights at somebody's cocktail party, but, you know --

McWHORTER: (laughter)

LOURY: -- if you don't care about that.

McWHORTER: No. (laughter) No.

LOURY: So it's probably not any big deal. And I'm sure that you're greatly valued as a lecturer and a teacher, and as long as that's the case, I mean, these kinds of appointments of, you know, sort of, long-term, renewable, if you will, teaching appointments are not uncommon. A good friend of mine is an economist, and we were full professors together at Boston University for years -- his name is Jeffrey Miron. He's actually got a pretty high profile in the world as an economic analyst, a Libertarian. Runs conferences at the Cato Institute. You see him on

MSNBC commenting on stuff every now and then on the "Morning Joe" show, and things like that.

McWHORTER: That type, yeah.

LOURY: Jeff Miron. He's a very smart, interesting guy. He's at Harvard as, I guess, some kind of Associate Professor, with a renewable five-year appointment, like John McWhorter at Columbia. No shame in it. I know that Harvard wouldn't let him go, because they greatly valued the services that he's providing, as I'm sure is the case at Columbia, so...

McWHORTER: He's not going to get fired, you know.

LOURY: I expect you'll do just fine, John. You'll do just fine.

McWHORTER: Yeah, I don't imagine, unless I do something really stupid, I think they kind of will need me. And I'm happy to be there. So yeah...

LOURY: Well, I want to say Columbia is a better place for you. I've said it here before on "The Glenn Show," and I'll say it again: The word I get from the inside sources amongst the undergraduates at Columbia, is that you are one of the baddest -- which is the best --

McWHORTER: (laughter)

LOURY: -- lecturers in the core curriculum in captivity. They're lining up --

McWHORTER: Well...

LOURY: -- to take your courses, and they're talking about it long after it's over. So congratulations once again, John.

(laughter)

McWHORTER: Well, thank you for (laughter) spreading that around. That's all they talk about up there.

LOURY: Oh, no, it's true.

McWHORTER: I enjoy it up there.

LOURY: It's also obvious. Everybody who listens to you knows that you're going to be a great expositor.

McWHORTER: It'll be fun. So yeah, I --

LOURY: But, you know, I have --

McWHORTER: -- do feel like I'm part of a community, in a way that I wasn't a few years ago.

LOURY: Yeah. I just wanted to come back to my own little case over here, in the Ivy League. Which is, even if I feel, sometimes bored, sometimes infuriated, sometimes depressed -- and sometimes I'm just despairing about, you know, the intellectual life that is led within the typical Economics Department. Even so, I love teaching here. I love what I'm doing every day. I love interacting with these young people. I like graduate teaching, with the new Ph.D.s, even though they can't look to the left or to the right. They are so blinkered it's unbelievable. They could tell you everything about the market -- who got a job

last year; what the latest little twist is; what, you know, Professor Smith at such-and-such a university has done on his most recent research thing or whatever. They are, you know, very, you know, attuned to what's going on today in the profession. Even so, they're not yet completely jaded.

(laughter)

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm. Right.

LOURY: They are willing to go and open up a book every now and then if you suggest that that book might be of some interest to them, even though it's not right on you know, the latest research protocol, or the latest whatever, whatever. And they listen. So I like teaching it, and I just love teaching our undergraduates. I mean, sometimes I just feel, you know, like I'm transported, in a (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) inner idea, which I've --

McWHORTER: Isn't the question session fun? The most fun for me is late in the class when they start asking questions. I like fielding the questions. And giving the answers, and kind of getting that energy going. For me, that's more fun than the lecturing parts, although I enjoy that too.

LOURY: And watching these young people mature, watching them come through their careers and go off and do amazing things in the world. I mean, one of my students from freshman year is now finishing up, and he started a foundation in Durham,

North Carolina, to bring baseball to inner-city middle school and high school kids. He's a baseball player. His name is Daniel Rosoff, as it happens. I don't think he'd mind me mentioning any of this. His foundation is called the Tobacco Road Foundation. And he's raised a little bit of money from wealthy people around in the Durham community, and he's got this thing organized, and he's got these kids playing ball. And they're talented, but more than that, you know, it's about mentoring. And, you know, more than that, it's about getting these kids out of this little, narrow world that they live in, and see the wider possibilities, and character building. It's just amazing. This kid is a social entrepreneur. OK --

McWHORTER: Glenn, can I ask you a dumb question?

LOURY: -- there are 20 of them. I could name 20 of them like that. Just to make the point -- the point is --

McWHORTER: Yeah.

LOURY: -- these kids are doing amazing things, and it's just such a privilege to be, you know...

McWHORTER: That's interesting. Just a question about the baseball?

LOURY: Yeah?

McWHORTER: I understand the way project like this often work, and I can imagine the general outlines, but maybe I'm

missing something. Don't kids play stickball? Like, why that sport? How did they not have any baseball?

LOURY: I gather -- and I'm not an expert, John -- that the difference between the stickball that you play -- you throw a rubber ball up against the box that you've drawn with chalk on the brick wall --

McWHORTER: And you hit -- right.

LOURY: -- and the kids try to hit the curveball, and, you know... The difference between that and real baseball is like night and day.

McWHORTER: OK.

LOURY: And that, you know, to really play, you know, baseball requires a lot of --

McWHORTER: Equipment.

LOURY: Training, equipment -- true enough. And facility -- you know, the right kind of diamond and field and all that. I gather -- and I'm now talking almost beyond my knowledge -- but that it also requires somebody to show you how to field a ground ball what you do when it's a fly ball hit over your head. Which way do you turn? How do you run the bases? What do you do when the pitcher starts doing the set? You know, you've got to face good pitching in order to become a good hitter. I guess there's a lot of stuff like that that kids don't --

McWHORTER: So stickball is not just baseball --

LOURY: -- without organization.

McWHORTER: -- with cheap equipment in the parking lot, which is what I thought it was. I guess it's something much less than what baseball is.

LOURY: I think stickball is much less to baseball as, for example, you know, playground basketball is to basketball.

McWHORTER: Sure. OK.

LOURY: I think it's less. I think you can get more basketball on the playground, you know, relevant to being able to play real basketball, than you can get baseball on the stickball...

McWHORTER: Right. Like, you wouldn't say we're going to bring basketball to this neighborhood. They're already doing it.

LOURY: (laughter)

McWHORTER: (laughter)

LOURY: Yeah, I see your point. Yeah, that would be unnecessary.

McWHORTER: I see what you mean. (laughter)

LOURY: But my point is just, not so much about the example as about the fact that these young people are ambitious, that they're very ingenious about what they do. They're extremely hard working. They're creative. They're bold.

They're brave. They go off and do a lot of things, and like I say, I could give you many examples of this. Kids that have started -- "kid" -- I call them kids. You know, this man is probably 24 years old now.

McWHORTER: He was a kid a few years ago. Yeah.

LOURY: (laughter) So he was. He started a -- you know, they've got a tea company. This is a soft drink, energy drink company, this is environmentally friendly, and they make --

McWHORTER: Oh.

LOURY: -- the beverage from a bush that grows in Ecuador. They've gone and convinced the local authorities, and they got the farmers all around. And they got the international logistics worked out, how they can get stuff to market, how they can make a buck on it. You know, just very clever. And like I said, I could give many other examples besides. So, yeah...

McWHORTER: You know what I enjoy about teaching undergraduates these days, now that I've gotten, you know, to middle age, and feel like I have some life experience to teach. And talk about the book reading. You get to the point where you've been reading books for decades, and because you've done that, there's a weight of references that you can give people. And I shouldn't say this in

public, because it's going to be misinterpreted by some, but that's just the way it goes.

LOURY: That's all right. Go ahead. (laughter)

McWHORTER: I like that, when I'm doing the more society-oriented classes -- like, for example, core curriculum, or if I'm doing a language topic like Black English, or, you know, whether or not to save indigenous languages --

LOURY: Yeah.

McWHORTER: I like giving the students both sides, and in no sense making it seem like one side is somehow more important. And what I mean by that is that I like opening the students up to views that they can sense are the ones that are considered un-P.C., and telling them that your job is to be able to back up what you think. And if you can back it up with information and insight, then it's worth a try, and we'll investigate the truth. And I think some people -- I used to get this back in the day, when I was regarded as particularly racially notorious. Every now and then I'd get a letter from an angry black mother saying, "I would never want my daughter to be in a class taught by you." Because she was imagining me standing up there talking about how lazy black people are, or something. And I have never done anything remotely like that, and I'm not only talking about race. But I like to

teach the students that that thing you're thinking, that you feel like you're not supposed to say -- it might be wrong, but please bring it up, and we'll let the facts go where they may. And I think that some of the students value that I am open to having a discussion about the whole spectrum. And I think a lot of professors do that, but I feel that as a very conscious mission. The idea being that the truth isn't easy, and sometimes it is the popular view, but sometimes the popular view is not true, and that we have to examine that. I've enjoyed being able to be a sort of father figure in that sense.

LOURY: Yeah. I'm with you on this, John --

McWHORTER: I like the comfort I give.

LOURY: -- 100%. That's very well put, I think.

McWHORTER: You do that, don't you?

LOURY: I do. I try to do it. I mean, the philosophy I take is that, you know, you came here to learn how to think, not to learn a particular thing, you know?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: I mean, there are, in the various fields, specific knowledge that a person has to imbibe. I mean, you can't do calculus unless you learn calculus.

McWHORTER: Sure.

LOURY: But you came here to learn how to think crucially. How do we evaluate arguments? What is evidence? How to come to an intelligent conclusion about complicated matters. Political correctness is the enemy of that. I mean, whatever stripe it takes. People used to use political correctness as a bludgeon, you know, against either the left or the right, depending on what the issue might be. But the idea that, you know, you have to conform to a view because the view is popular, or because you will be, figuratively, spat upon if you take up the opposite view this is the enemy of thinking. Why come to a university if that's the case? I mean, if all you wanted was cheerleading, you could have gone to, you know, a playground and formed a cheerleading group. And then you can all chant, like, a mantra together. So, you know, I agree with that 100%.

McWHORTER: Although, of course, you know there are many, many people teaching at universities who would say that what your job is at a university is to teach people what has been revealed to be the truth. And for them, those truths would usually be ones that most people on the left would be comfortable with. And the idea -- to go back to this -- would be that it's been proven by statistical techniques that these things are true. And, you know, I've

never gone head to head with somebody who felt that way, but my students certainly tell me that they encounter many other people whose basic attitude towards all of this is that. And I suppose you should have some of them, but then there are some of us who may be...

LOURY: They're so deeply wrong, though, in my view -- if I get you right? That is, "We figured it out, and so now you need to know what it is that we figured out as right." You know, what we do about gay, lesbian, black -- you know --

McWHORTER: School, education, you know...

LOURY: What do we do about class? And, you know, capitalism is bad -- the profits. Or global -- for military, for a better America, it's hegemonic, and, you know, whatever. And so you just need to learn the mantra, and then... And here's what I think is wrong with that. Now, I never studied under a person of your talents at Columbia in the core curriculum, but I did manage to read John Stuart Mill's essay "On Liberty" somewhere along the way.

McWHORTER: We read that. Yeah.

LOURY: I recall very vividly this killer argument that Mills [sic] makes in there. You know, he's talking about how people ought to be able to profess atheism without getting locked up, you know? Which, in the 19th century -- you know, you could get locked up for professing atheism. So

he's saying, you know -- he's got all kinds of arguments, OK? But one of the arguments is, Let's suppose the guy is wrong -- the atheist. Let's suppose he's just wrong, OK?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: However -- however -- we don't bother to refute him. We just lock him up, OK?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: So, while we are right and he is wrong, we will, in due course, forget why we're right. Our truth will have no vitality. It won't be a living truth. If it doesn't bother to refute error, it can't reinforce and make vivid, in the minds of successive generations, the very character of its truth. It ossifies into dogma." OK?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: So, I mean, he's obviously right about that, it seems to me. And this impulse, that we have to, you know, instill in the young the right thoughts is, in my mind, deadening to the pedagogic enterprise.

McWHORTER: And, you know, what's interesting is that you can take that famous argument of Mill's, and even it can be used in ways where it can be funny to be on the other end of it. So, for example, me and my supposed linguistic heresies about what it's like when a language is new, and how it's not as full of barnacles as Russian. Many people

will say -- I get a backhanded compliment -- "Oh, John, that idea is stimulating. Thank you for your stimulation." And what they mean is that they're glad that somebody like me said something like that, so that they can all make their case that this could not possibly be true -- that any language is newer or less complicated than another one. So they value me for allowing them to make a case which they think is central to teaching the world about how language works. But it's not that they think (laughter) that I'm right. And I think that I am right, and so, in this case, I guess I'm the atheist. But it's funny sometimes to be on the other end of that very valuable kind of comment, that Mill made about those sorts of things. But, you know, life goes on.

LOURY: So, let's talk about something else, John. Let's talk about life. There you are, a new father. I'm very curious to know how it's going now. What are you, like, three, four months into this?

McWHORTER: Three and a half.

LOURY: My goodness.

McWHORTER: Yeah. You know what the truth of it is? I would say this: There's a culture of how you talk about babies, and I've noticed how it works, and I know how to adhere to it. But here I'm going to break a little rule. I would

say -- and my wife and I look forward to doing it at least one more time -- the first six weeks were really tough. I mean, you love your child --

LOURY: (laughter)

McWHORTER: -- but, you know, the not being able to, you know, sleep through the night, and that affects the man not as much as the woman, but still -- especially if you're not a good sleeper, which I've never been. It affects you. And, you know, you're trying to teach. You're trying to write things. And you're always tired.

LOURY: Yeah.

McWHORTER: And you love your little baby, but you can't get to sleep. And they're not present yet. You know, when their eyes aren't really open.

LOURY: Yeah.

McWHORTER: And you can't really tell why they're crying. That first six weeks was really different. After six weeks -- and for us, it was almost to the day -- the eyes open. You start getting the first smiles. The sleep gets easier. And at this point, I rush home, just waiting to see her. I take her to day care. Boy, this is sounding sappy, but the first six weeks were a real challenge on all levels. After that -- now, I get why everybody's talking about --

LOURY: (laughter)

McWHORTER: -- the relation of having a child. And the funny thing about her is that she's oddly -- and I'm not talking about patting her on the back -- she's pretty. I happened to get a pretty child. You know, people walk up to her on the street --

LOURY: Oh, that's lovely.

McWHORTER: -- and stuff. And so that helps, because she's charming. They like her here in day care, and as much as you hate to admit it, when your child is that pleasing to look at -- I hate to admit that it even helps a little bit in your relating to them before they can talk. So, yeah, it's a delight.

LOURY: So that was another -- how's mother doing?

McWHORTER: Mother is tireder [sic], of course. But she has gone back to work.

LOURY: Uh huh. You mentioned day care.

McWHORTER: And everything is fine, and we're about to have extended family, down to great grandparents, who luckily are alive and well and mentally all there. They're going to come and spend a long weekend with us. And it's funny. I can't believe that I wasn't a parent three and a half months ago. I'm surprised at how life does go on. But you've been through it. It's really something else. It's something else completely.

LOURY: Yeah.

McWHORTER: But you stay yourself. I always thought I would never write again. I thought I would never have another thought. I figured that I was basically going to be on pause for ten years. And that's not true. You adjust. You reconstitute yourself around your new responsibilities. But what a trip -- it really is something.

LOURY: So I am experiencing anxiety on the other end of the life cycle, with my father who lives in central Florida -- in fact, north of Orlando. And that's also where the Trayvon Martin incidents have played out, in a gated community as it happens. And he's got various health challenges, and he's --

McWHORTER: And they're starting to multiply.

LOURY: Yeah, he's 83. He'll be 83 on his next birthday. Yeah, they're starting to multiply. He sounds, you know, just tired. Not as alert, and, you know, weak.

McWHORTER: Yeah.

LOURY: And the therapy that he's undergoing for his condition is weighing on him. You know, it's just...

McWHORTER: It's hard listening to that, as it happens. Watching it.

LOURY: And he's in Florida. It's a long way from Providence, Rhode Island, or Brookline, Massachusetts where I live.

McWHORTER: You can't go there every weekend. Yeah.

LOURY: I can't go every weekend, and he's my dad, you know?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: It's an entire lifetime.

McWHORTER: Is there any way to bring him back? Bring him up?

LOURY: (laughter)

McWHORTER: No.

LOURY: No, I mean, he ain't coming. (laughter)

McWHORTER: (laughter)

LOURY: There's really no obstacle. I've got a huge --

McWHORTER: Because why would anybody want to, you know...

LOURY: -- empty house here. I mean, yow know, if were going to be lamenting my existential condition, it would go to the fact of my wife having passed away six months ago --

McWHORTER: Of course.

LOURY: -- and my kids being off to college. You know, I've got this huge house, and I don't even know what my life means anymore. And I've got all these things, you know, to take care of, and these routines to continue to go through, except they seem empty and bereft of any real life. And I don't know what my goals are. I'm sorry, again, to be all this moaning.

McWHORTER: No, I can imagine dealing with...

LOURY: But here we are. I had my project. My project was very clear, you know, with my life partner, and, you know, our kids, and everything like that. But now I've got to completely re-think the project, you know?

McWHORTER: Glenn, your project is a *magnum opus*, I think. I'm putting myself in your head, but isn't it time to write a very rich, serious book. Nothing gets me out of that state that you're talking about, to the extent that I've had an approximation of it, like having a book plan. Does that make sense? A big plan.

LOURY: Yeah, John, you really are challenging me. You know? I'm keeping notes on our conversation here. "John on Fatherhood." Now, "Glenn's Existential Dilemma" is my next note. (laughter)

McWHORTER: Project. (laughter)

LOURY: Crisis.

McWHORTER: You have to wake up looking forward to something that's never quite finished.

LOURY: No, the fact of the matter is, I have never written a big book, OK? Let's just get the cards out on the table. I'll say it so no one else has to. I've written a lot of clever little books and articles. I've never written a big book. I've never actually taken on and tried to sustain -- I mean, for example, James Q. Wilson, the political

scientist, died recently. I wrote a, kind of, intellectual obit that was kind of critical of some of the stuff that he had had during the course of his lifetime.

McWHORTER: I read that. Yeah.

LOURY: But he was a great man, without any doubt. And he was a part of this generation of people who are dying, OK?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: James Q. Wilson was in his early 80s. He might have been 80, OK?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY:: I mean, he came along in the early '60s. He was Professor of Government at Harvard, when Ed Banfield was still writing -- the very influential political scientist of the mid-20th century. And James Q. Wilson has lived until 2012, and he's passed away. He is, in some ways, the godfather of the punishment revolution that is happening in America -- its intellectual godfather. The long and short of it is, he died. I knew him very well, OK? And I knew that generation of people around the American Academy, and this sort of aftermath of the 1960s, where we were re-thinking social policy. I was present on the ground in the 15 years before Clinton's welfare reform. In the early smoldering of a kind of intellectual revolution about social policy was underway. And when Charles Murray was

writing his first book, and I knew Richard Herrnstein of *The Bell Curve* personally, and very well. I knew Charles Colson, who just died, very well.

McWHORTER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

LOURY: I served for five years on the Board of Directors of the Prison Fellowship memories. This is not bragging.

This is just --

McWHORTER: No, it's just --

LOURY: -- saying that I've --

McWHORTER: -- your history.

LOURY: -- got a pretty interesting angle of vision on American intellectual life in the last thirty years of the 20th century. And, you know, I've been in my own little, small way, a participant in some of that. I'm very well trained as an economist, and I have a comprehensive grasp of the social sciences. Again, I say that with all modesty. But I'm just saying, I haven't even thought about writing a big book, OK? All I've thought about doing is, you know, putting out the next fire. You know, "What if I publish late?" "When's the pub--?" You know, "Oh, I've got this clever idea." "I've got this graduate student, and we've got this little bell and whistle thing over here..." And, on a separate track all together is my public intellectual life, which consists largely of

commentary, but not of any sustained, critical reflection on the state of contemporary American intellectual and political life. Which I ought to do!

McWHORTER: You mean, i.e., *The New York Review of Books*.

LOURY: Pardon me?

McWHORTER: In other words, the only place I can think of where that would really happen now, regularly, would be *The New York Review of Books*, right?

LOURY: Yeah, *The New York Review of Books*. It's true.

And...

McWHORTER: I don't know what your relationship to them is, actually?

LOURY: Well, they --

McWHORTER: I'm not really up --

LOURY: They invited me write a piece some time ago, and I never wrote the piece, OK? I'm too lazy, and disorganized, and I didn't write the piece that I was invited to submit. Something at "The New York Review." And time went by, and the moment passed. I'm sure if I wanted to write something for them they'd be happy to think about it, because I think I have people around the magazine there who admire me, including Robert Silvers. So, you know, I mean, again -- not to be bragging, but just to say... And, you know, it's all a piece. I mean, I'm not... Anyway, enough of my

confessing my indolence and, you know, my lack of discipline. You're right. I need a big project. That would be part of it. And maybe I need a girlfriend too, John.

McWHORTER: You must. I mean, that's --

LOURY: I mean, in the appropriate time. (laughter)

McWHORTER: In the appropriate time. And you need to take -- you didn't ask me, but -- piano. You need to go with some young jazz musician and take weekly piano lessons, because you play.

LOURY: Oh, John, thank you! (laughter)

McWHORTER: And wouldn't it be fun to just kind of brush up, and to learn some extra chords?

LOURY: And I'm looking right now at this beautiful grand piano that my wife made me spend an unspeakable sum to acquire, and that I love, John!

McWHORTER: Can't let that go to seed.

LOURY: I love the sound of that piano. I'd love to say I didn't let my finger tickle the ivories, so to speak. And block out the little chords that I can block out, and run the little riffs that I can run.

McWHORTER: (laughter)

LOURY: I love it! And, you know, just yesterday, my son and I were at a jazz brunch over in Cambridge --

McWHORTER: See?

LOURY: And this woman was just playing these tunes, man. And she was playing them. And I was telling Glenn everything she was doing. I'm saying, "All she's doing is arpeggio and that chord, there. All she's doing is arpegg--" I'm saying, "Look how she does a double chromatic approach to those quarter notes in the thing there." I'm saying, "This is a simple blues, you can hear: boom-BOOM." I'm saying -
-

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: "Syncopation," you know? "Right off the beat -- boom-BOOM, boom-BOOM, boom-BOOM." You know?

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: I'm basically giving my son a music lesson at the brunch table. I love the music. And you're right.

McWHORTER: See?

LOURY: It would give me great pleasure to have a greater command of it.

McWHORTER: You were talking faster there. You have to do that. I mean, you know I do a cabaret show. That kind of got me out of some blues I was having a year and a half ago. Every month I get in there and play for about 11 people. And it is, itself -- talk about core curriculum at Columbia? It is the ultimate good. It's just for itself.

It's not for money. It's not for fame. I don't care who knows. It's just fun in itself, and it gets your chops going. You have to get better to keep on doing it.

LOURY: You need to let me know about that next cabaret thing. I was in New York City for a year, and I did not see you perform.

McWHORTER: It never worked while you were here. But yeah, you are going to see one of them one of these days.

LOURY: Well, I'm willing to come down, because Nehemiah, my son, is at Columbia.

McWHORTER: That's right.

LOURY: And he's dancing in the Raw Elements group there, that they perform --

McWHORTER: Oh, is he in that?

LOURY: Oh, yeah. I mean, he's a leader in that group. He's --

McWHORTER: Oh, that's fun. That's good.

LOURY: Yeah, he and his b-boys have got a little subgroup of breakers and -- yeah, he's doing choreography stuff, and --

McWHORTER: Mm-hmm. I've probably seen him, come to think of it. Walking around.

LOURY: Yeah --

McWHORTER: Yeah?

LOURY: -- you probably have seen him.

McWHORTER: Yeah. So...

LOURY: So, what is left to talk about here, John? Do you think we've got one in the can here?

McWHORTER: Well, you know, this one is in the can.

LOURY: I think so. I don't think we're doing politics today. I think we're doing life today. And I think we've done it justice.

McWHORTER: This one is going to be interesting, in terms of how it's edited. (laughter)

LOURY: (laughter)

McWHORTER: But I think we should wait for a few weeks, and I'm going into summer. I'm going to be back on that schedule where I have, quote-unquote, summers off. I haven't done that in (laughter) ten years. I'm going back into the summer, and so I'm going to be much freer than I've been over the past few months.

LOURY: Welcome, John, to the leisure of the theory class.

McWHORTER: (laughter)

LOURY: (laughter)

McWHORTER: That's what this is, isn't it?

LOURY: That's what it is, my man.

McWHORTER: That is this.

LOURY: And it's good. (laughter)

McWHORTER: Yeah. (laughter) In the summer. That's right.

LOURY: It's all right to talk to you. We'll do it again in a few weeks.

McWHORTER: You too, Glenn.

LOURY: OK.

McWHORTER: See you soon.

LOURY: Bye-bye.

McWHORTER: Bye.

END OF AUDIO FILE